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SUBJECT: Tanzanian Press Takes April Fool's Day Seriously:
Front Page Jokes Illustrate Top Issues on Media Minds

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¶1. The April First editions of several Tanzanian dailies allocated space on their front pages to play April Fool's jokes on their readership.

¶2. The Guardian (circulation 25,000) ran an above the fold article entitled, "Government makes about-turn and buys Dowans plant secretly." The last several months have seen a debate played out in the print media between those who advocated for parastatal Tanzania Electric Supply Company (TANESCO) to purchase used 100MW generators to alleviate the ongoing power shortage affecting the country, especially in Dar es Salaam, and those who argue the proposed deal would have violated procurement law. Moreover, the equipment in question originally entered Tanzania as part of the Richmond contract; the scandal over that contract led to the Prime Minister's resignation in February 2008(reftel). Previous front pages on the controversy over Dowans (allegedly owned by MP Rostam Aziz, who also owns several media outlets) have been devoted to intra-party spats between prominent Members of Parliament (and National Executive Committee) from the ruling Chama Chama Mapinduzi (CCM) party. Some vitriol was disparaging enough to provoke other CCM leaders to intervene in the interest of party cohesion.

¶3. Swahili daily Majira (circulation 20,000) ran a front page story headline stating that former president Benjamin Mkapa would address a public rally today to "boldly defend" himself against allegations of corruption and abuse of power during his tenure (1995-2005). Citing immunity for a former head of state, President Kikwete, joined by a handful of constitutional legal experts, last year quelled ever present clamoring from the opposition and some public quarters for Mkapa (and his wife, Anna) to be charged with illegally operating a private business from State House while in power. Mkapa has retreated to his compound in the posh Dar es Salaam suburb of Msasani and, when seen in public, is more often outside of Tanzania.

¶4. This Day (circulation 5,000) ran a below the fold story, "Three ministers out, two transferred in minor reshuffle," reporting the Finance Minister, Water and Irrigation Minister (and former presidential aspirant), and Minister for Good Governance (recently elected head of the CCM party women's wing) had been tossed out of the cabinet, while two others (one currently involved in a legal dispute with the media) had been transferred to different ministries. In fact, the last ministerial shakeup in Tanzania took place in February 2008, when then-Prime Minister Edward Lowassa and two ministers stepped down following allegations of corruption in the Richmond affair, which were made during parliamentary debate carried live on national television. (Note: separately, former Attorney General/Minister of Infrastructure and Development Andrew Chenge, who stepped down in April 2008 over revelations of unexplained offshore bank accounts, was charged yesterday with reckless driving after he was in a 4 a.m. accident over the weekend in which two women in the other vehicle died. End note.)

¶ 15. The government-owned Daily News (circulation 10,000) also had some fun poking regional neighbors by claiming that Tanzania had withdrawn from the East African Community (EAC). Recently, Tanzania's tough position on land and labor issues have contributed to discontent within the EAC, which was exacerbated by a Kenyan (quickly withdrawn) proposal to relocate the EAC's headquarters from Arusha.

¶ 16. The African (circulation 5,000) ran a below the fold story, "Mugabe finally agrees to resign," stating Zimbabwe's president would relinquish his role to Prime Minister Tsvangirai in one month's time. The faux article included fake Mugabe quotes supporting his rival.

¶ 17. Comment: While the total print media circulation is only a fraction of the entire Tanzanian population, front page stories are frequently displayed on the morning television news and read as radio news bulletins, thereby reaching millions of viewers and listeners. While one deejay noted it was April Fool's Day, he did not clarify which news items were meant as a joke. All the stories above concluded with some form of "April Fool's Day," but most reveal the true sentiments of some editors about what the media fraternity, and the wider Tanzanian public, would like to see happen to improve the standard of living and the level of good governance in Tanzania. Those editors who do not venture to write about such things in their daily commentaries--either out of fear of government disfavor or censorship from media owners (some who are prominent politicians)--can safely defend April 1st stories by saying, "it was only a joke!"

ANDRE